

# Variability and Similarity in Honors Curricula across Institution Size and Type

ANDREW J. COGNARD-BLACK

St. Mary's College, the Maryland Public Honors College

HALLIE SAVAGE

National Collegiate Honors Council

As Samuel Schuman argues in his seminal introduction to honors administration, “The single most important feature of any honors program is its people: the students who learn there and the faculty who teach them” (33). Next, argues Schuman, comes the curriculum; the context of the learning that takes place when honors faculty and honors students come together is framed by the curriculum. Honors curricula provide opportunities for honors students to endeavor challenges beyond what traditional undergraduate curricula provide. For faculty, honors is a unique opportunity to blend research and teaching and to provide a curricular laboratory for experimenting with varied topics and pedagogical approaches.

The National Collegiate Honors Council provides guidelines for such curricula in its “Definition of Honors Education,” including the following:

1. “Curricula are characterized largely by core-curriculum honors courses, often with seminars that provide greater depth (not necessarily disciplinary depth)”;
2. “Programs confront students with alternative modes of inquiry, exploration, discovery, tolerance of ambiguity, and enduring questions. Coursework often requires integrative learning: both local and global learning with connections across time, genre, and disciplines, not always in classroom situations”; and
3. “The products often involve creative integrations of evidence from several disciplines with an aggressive emphasis on interdisciplinarity. Assessment of the products emphasizes process rather than product, focusing on metacognitive questions such as ‘how do you know?’”

Honors programs and colleges thus offer various forms of unique curricular and extracurricular experiences. Typically, the honors curriculum is designed to incorporate the following developmental scaffolding:

1. A required course emphasizing basic skills in communication and critical reasoning;
2. A sequence of general education and/or special topics courses;
3. A research seminar that prepares students for senior-level research;
4. A thesis or capstone experience of individual research or creative work.

The honors thesis or capstone experience is often recognized as the most rewarding experience in an undergraduate program of study (Anderson, Lyons, and Weiner).

When a well-developed honors curriculum is paired with co-curricular opportunities, it serves to distinguish an institution’s honors education. Together, these curricular and co-curricular experiences are described as best practices in the NCHC’s “Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors Program.” The fourth characteristic specifies that honors curricula feature “special courses, seminars, colloquia, experiential learning opportunities, undergraduate research opportunities, and other independent-study options,” and the fifteenth characteristic specifies that honors programs emphasize active, participatory learning through provision of, among other features, “international programs, community service, internships, undergraduate research, and other types of experiential education.” The NCHC’s

“Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors College” goes still further in emphasizing undergraduate research: “The honors college requires an honors thesis or honors capstone project” (Characteristic 9).

In order to incorporate these best practices within an undergraduate program, honors administrators need to consider the interface of honors requirements with the general education curriculum and the major field of study, the type of thesis or capstone experience, and the relative emphasis on, for instance, communication skills, inquiry, and critical analysis (Taylor). Curricular enhancement is also accomplished by designing co-curricular opportunities such as credit-bearing service learning, internships, and other experiential education offerings. Required service learning, internship experiences, study abroad, and other experiential education provide unique learning contexts and often are resonant with the institution’s mission.

Although literature is available to describe honors curricula (Braid), and while the NCHC “Basic Characteristics” documents provide some guidelines for best practices in honors education, data are needed to support these guidelines and to determine what curricular models effectively frame and incorporate best practices. Furthermore, research is needed to discover whether curricular structure is dependent on institution type or size. Rick Scott has presented some work in this direction in his NCHC presidential report appearing in the special edition of the NCHC newsletter in June 2013. Scott’s presentation focuses primarily on variation across honors organizational structures, e.g., honors colleges vis-à-vis honors programs, and among honors programs Scott further explores variation between two-year and four-year degree institutions. Questions remain, however, about variation across other structural characteristics that often interest educational researchers, such as size and institutional control by private or public interests.

Thus, important questions to address include whether enrollment size and institutional type (e.g., public, private) influence the types of curricular offerings; whether curricular and co-curricular experiences (e.g., internships, service learning) tend to occur more frequently in particular types of institution; and whether such experiences differ across institutions of varying size.

## **METHODS**

### **Sample**

We used data from the 2012–2013 NCHC Membership Survey. This survey of several hundred items was initiated on April 25, 2012, but with only limited

success. Forty-five of 890 institutions (5% response) responded between April and August 2012. In the interests of improving response rate, the survey was streamlined to 50 questions, and the leaner version was launched August 28, 2012. Periodic reminder email messages were sent on ten separate occasions by NCHC office staff at an average of about every three to four weeks between September 2012 and February 2013. In a final drive in the last half of February, four weekly reminders were sent, and the survey was closed in March 2013.

After duplicate responses were removed, the survey had 446 unique responses—an overall response rate of 50.1%. Comparison of response rates within the categories of honors college members, honors program members, and, further, honors programs at four-year and two-year degree institutions indicates that, with the exception of two-year institutions, the response was similar across these organizational forms: responses included 52.1% of honors colleges, 49.7% of honors programs, and, more specifically, 53.1% of honors programs at four-year institutions, all within just 3 percentage points of the overall response rate. Honors programs at two-year institutions were less likely to participate in the survey, with only 39% responding.

## Measures

We focus on eight measures from survey items that tap into nine curricular characteristics of honors programs: (1) thesis requirement, (2) capstone course, (3) a combined measure of the first two indicating the presence of either a thesis requirement or a capstone course, (4) service requirement, (5) service learning courses, (6) study abroad courses, (7) experiential education courses, (8) research-intensive courses, and (9) internships. Each of these variables is a binary, i.e., yes or no, nominal-level measure of the presence of a particular curricular attribute derived from responses to survey questions. For instance, the survey item tapping into the presence of a thesis requirement asks, “Do you have a thesis requirement in honors?”

Table 1 is an extract of Scott’s 2013 summary table, which can be found online at the NCHC web site. This table presents the question wording for survey items used to construct eight of our nine measures, and the first column in the body of the table also presents percentages that indicate how common each characteristic is in honors as a whole. For instance, only 25.3% of responding institutions reported having internships for honors students while 72.6% reported having research-intensive honors courses. In addition to the eight items presented in Table 1, we also constructed a ninth measure that combines the thesis and capstone questions to identify which schools

**TABLE 1. NCHC INSTITUTIONAL DATABASE AND 2012 MEMBER INSTITUTION SURVEY SUMMARY TABLE: PERCENT RESPONDING YES TO SELECTED CURRICULAR ITEMS**

Question	Total Member Institutions	Honors College Members <sup>a</sup>	Honors Program Members		
			Total Program Members	Four-Year Institution Members	Two-Year Institution Members
Total Member Institutions	890	140	750	573	177
Total Responding Institutions	446	73	373	304	69
Response Rate	50.1	52.1	49.7	53.1	39.0
31. Do you have a thesis requirement in honors?	50.2	50.7	50.1	59.1	10.3
32. Do you have a service requirement in honors?	39.3	46.6	37.9	37.3	40.6
33. Do you have a capstone course in honors?	44.0	51.4	42.6	46.0	27.5
34. Do you have service learning courses in honors?	46.4	58.9	43.9	42.0	52.2
35. Do you have study abroad courses in honors?	43.7	66.2	39.4	44.4	17.4
36. Do you have experiential education courses in honors?	41.1	51.4	39.1	39.1	38.8
37. Do you have honors courses that are research-intensive?	72.6	80.8	70.9	71.3	69.1
38. Do you have internships for honors students?	25.3	43.8	21.6	23.3	14.5

Source: This is an extract reproduced from a table included in Scott's (2013) NCHC Newsletter special edition report summarizing the 2012–2013 NCHC Membership Survey (used with permission from the author).

<sup>a</sup> All but three of the Honors College members that responded are four-year institutions.

have either a thesis requirement or a capstone course, i.e., coded “yes” if either one is present, “no” otherwise.

Measures of institutional characteristics come from either the 2012–2013 Membership Survey or from membership data already a part of the NCHC institutional member database. Our measure of honors organizational structure is derived from a 2012–2013 survey question asking respondents to identify “Honors Organization Type” from a choice of either “Honors Program” or “Honors College.” Three additional measures of institutional characteristics come directly from the NCHC membership database: (1) a ratio-level measure of size of the undergraduate student body (full-time equivalent students); (2) a nominal-level measure distinguishing “private” from “public” institutional control; and (3) a nominal-level measure distinguishing two-year associate’s degree-granting institutions from four-year institutions granting degrees at the baccalaureate level or higher. While it would have been useful to include a more elaborated measure of institutional mission, i.e., Carnegie classification, that distinguished baccalaureate colleges, master’s universities, and doctoral/research universities among the four-year schools, no such measure is currently available in the NCHC membership database or the 2012–2013 Membership Survey data.

## **Analytic Strategy**

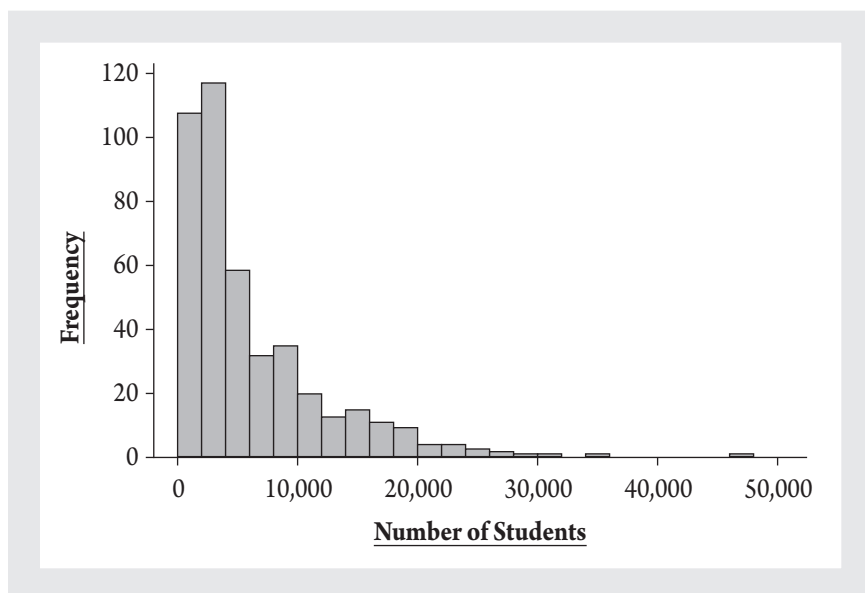
In the analysis that we present here, we seek to examine the nine curricular and co-curricular measures identified above, and we attempt to explore the supposition that circulates in many NCHC conversations that there is great variability among NCHC institutional members in honors structure, curriculum, and other institutional characteristics. Specifically, we wanted to explore variation across not only honors organizational structure and broad degree classification (associate’s degree institutions vs. those that offer baccalaureate and advanced degrees), but also across institutional control, i.e., private vs. public institutions, and institution size (total undergraduate full-time equivalent [FTE] enrollment).<sup>1</sup>

We calculated proportions of those institutions saying “yes” to each of the nine curricular measures within each of the sub-samples defined by each of the four dimensions identified above: broad degree classification grouping, honors organizational structure, institutional control, and size. We explored size, presented in Figure 1, first by operationalizing as an ordinal measure and collapsing institutions into categories with roughly evenly sized small, medium, and large institution groupings, where small was 0–2,999, medium

was 3,000–9,999, and large was 10,000+ in size. We discovered few differences across size measured in three categories, so we then measured size as an ordinal measure with two roughly evenly sized small ( $n = 222$ ) and large ( $n = 218$ ) institution groups, where small was defined as 0–3,999 and large was defined as those larger than 4,000 (note that 6 of the 446 survey respondents have missing size data).

To explore variation, we conducted  $z$ -tests of difference between proportions (analogous to  $t$ -tests of differences between means) and also examined patterns of consistency within similar dimensions (e.g., private institutions with honors colleges and private institutions with honors programs). Since our study was exploratory, we used two-tailed tests, and since some sample sizes for specific measures were small, we used an alpha level of .10 to guide us in identifying potential differences. While we used somewhat liberal thresholds, most of the differences that we present are significant at the  $p \leq .05$  level, including a number that are significant at the  $p \leq .01$  level. Because of the number of comparisons, we have chosen not to distinguish between levels of significance in the tabular presentation of data, but in the description of findings we do note  $p$  values for some contrasts when those values are especially compelling.

**FIGURE 1. NCHC MEMBER INSTITUTION TOTAL UNDERGRADUATE ENROLLMENT (FTE)**



Source: NCHC 2012–2013 Membership Survey

## FINDINGS

### General Finding of Note: Size Doesn't Seem to Matter Much

One of the most general findings that we discovered is that there is very little statistically distinguishable variation in the curricular characteristics across size of institution (as measured by total undergraduate FTE). We did not see many differences when using ANOVA to detect difference across the three-category measure of size, nor did we see many differences when using *z*-tests to examine differences between large and small institutions in the two-category operationalization of institution size. As a supplementary analysis, we also calculated bivariate correlations for size (in its original ratio-level measurement) and binary measures (coded 1 when present, 0 otherwise) of each of the curricular characteristics of interest, and correlations were typically quite small, ranging from  $r = .01$  to  $.24$ .<sup>2</sup>

Because of this general finding, most of our presentation will focus on an analysis that elides size as a dimension. In Table 2, however, we show one example of the approach that we used in the early exploration that included size, in this case for internships, one of the curricular measures for which we observed the most differences across size. The top row restricts sub-samples to small institutions, the middle row restricts to large institutions, and the bottom row contrasts degree type, honors structure, and institutional control regardless of size.

In the case of internships, we found 16 significant contrasts that are visible in this table. In an examination of the significant contrasts across categories of size (indicated by footnote h), it appears that internships are more likely found among honors colleges at larger schools than among honors colleges at smaller schools as well as more likely among honors programs at large privates than among those at small privates. However, two of these three contrasts are significant only at the  $p \leq .10$  level, and all three involve small sample sizes ( $n = 3, 7, \text{ and } 17$ ). While there is a significant difference at the  $p \leq .01$  level between large and small four-year degree institutions regardless of honors structure or institutional control (33.5% vs. 19.6%), and while it does make some (post hoc) sense that larger institutions and programs would be more likely to have honors internships by virtue of their greater resources and economies of scale, even in this instance the bivariate correlation between a ratio measure of size and the binary measure of internships was quite small ( $r = .14$ ; not shown).



Shrewd readers will note that the number of comparisons implied by Table 2 are many, thus increasing the probability of committing a Type I error in which we would incorrectly conclude that there is a significant difference where no real difference exists. In other words, because of the workings of chance and the disproportionate impact of chance occurrences for small samples, there may be a few comparisons where we would think we see a difference between two percentages when that difference is really too small to say confidently that the two are anything other than equal. Thus, we might find a significant difference for a few comparisons just by chance. Given some of the small sub-sample sizes and the probability of finding a significant difference by chance, we have tried to be cautious when drawing conclusions. Since our analysis is exploratory rather than a formal testing of hypotheses, we use significance as a guide to draw attention to contrasts where there may be differences, and among those possible differences we try to focus on whether any differences in percentages are not only statistically significant but also meaningful.

We did notice a few other significant contrasts by size using the strategy illustrated above—for thesis requirement and for experiential education, study abroad, and service learning courses—but for the sake of simplicity, because size had few visible effects on the presence of curricular characteristics, we have condensed our primary presentation to focus on percentages comparable to those at the bottom of Table 2, i.e., regardless of size. The results of these analyses for all nine curricular measures of interest are presented in Table 3.

### **Other General Finding of Note**

As a final point of interest before proceeding to the primary analysis, one of the first results that we notice when including size as a measure is that there are very few honors colleges at large private institutions among the NCHC institutions that responded. There are only four honors colleges at private institutions of 4,000+, and among the 92 schools over 10,000 in size there are no (zero) private schools with an honors college (not shown). Nor, for that matter, are there that many honors colleges at private schools of any size (only 1.8% of the total sample) or honors programs at larger private institutions ( $n = 17$ ). This data set includes only the half of member institutions that responded to the survey, but it seems safe to conclude that membership of large private schools in NCHC was rare in 2012.

**TABLE 2. PERCENT WITH INTERNSHIPS BY SIZE, DEGREE CLASSIFICATION, HONORS ORGANIZATION, AND CONTROL**

Institution Size	Four-Year Degree Institutions										Two-Year Degree Institutions <sup>a</sup>	
	Honors College			Honors Program				Total				
	Control		Total	Control		Public	Private	Total	Public	Private		Total
	Private	Public		Private	Public							
<i>Small (0-3,999)</i>												
Percent	0.0%	0.0% <sup>b</sup>	0.0% <sup>b</sup>	0.0% <sup>b</sup>	16.3% <sup>b,b</sup>	36.1% <sup>b</sup>	20.3%	19.6% <sup>b</sup>	16.2%			
SE	.000	.000	.000	.031	.081	.030	.029	.061				
<i>n</i>	4	3	7	141	36	177	184	37				
<i>Large (4,000+)</i>												
Percent	0.0% <sup>b</sup>	52.5% <sup>b,c,h</sup>	49.2% <sup>d,f,h</sup>	35.3% <sup>h</sup>	23.5% <sup>c</sup>	25.2% <sup>d</sup>	33.5% <sup>e,h</sup>	14.7% <sup>e,f</sup>				
SE	.000	.066	.063	.119	.042	.040	.035	.062				
<i>n</i>	4	59	63	17	102	119	182	34				
<i>Total</i>												
Percent	0.0% <sup>b</sup>	50.0% <sup>b,c</sup>	44.3% <sup>d,f</sup>	18.4% <sup>b</sup>	26.8% <sup>b,c</sup>	22.3% <sup>d</sup>	26.5% <sup>e</sup>	15.5% <sup>e,f</sup>				
SE	.000	.064	.060	.031	.038	.024	.023	.043				
<i>n</i>	8	62	70	158	138	296	366	71				

Source: NCHC 2012 Membership Survey.

Note: Tests of difference between means reveal significant differences between colleges and programs ( $t = 3.57, p \leq .01$ ), between smaller and larger institutions ( $t = -2.81, p \leq .01$ ), and between four- and two-year institutions ( $t = -2.46, p \leq .05$ ). We have converted the proportions to percentages, but readers should note that standard errors are those for the proportions on which those percentages are based.

<sup>a</sup>All of the two-year degree institutions are public, and all but three are classified as honors programs.

- <sup>b</sup>Significant difference between private and public institutions within honors organization type.
- <sup>c</sup>Significant difference between colleges and programs within institutional control grouping.
- <sup>d</sup>Significant difference between colleges and programs.
- <sup>e</sup>Significant difference between two-year degree institutions and four-year institutions.
- <sup>f</sup>Significant difference between two-year degree institutions and four-year honors colleges.
- <sup>g</sup>Significant difference between two-year degree institutions and four-year honors programs.
- <sup>h</sup>Significant difference between small and large institutions within degree-honors-control grouping.

**TABLE 3. PERCENT OF MEMBERS WITH SELECTED CURRICULAR CHARACTERISTICS BY DEGREE CLASSIFICATION, HONORS ORGANIZATION, AND CONTROL**

Curricular Item	Four-Year Degree Institutions										Two-Year Degree Institutions <sup>a</sup>
	Honors College			Honors Program			Total	Total Four-Year	Total	Total Four-Year	
	Control		Total	Control		Total					
	Private	Public		Private	Public						
Thesis Requirement	62.5%	50.0%	51.4% <sup>f</sup>	60.4%	58.4%	59.5% <sup>g</sup>	57.9% <sup>e</sup>	59.5% <sup>g</sup>	57.9% <sup>e</sup>	11.4% <sup>e,f,g</sup>	
Capstone Course	85.7% <sup>b,c</sup>	46.8% <sup>b</sup>	50.7% <sup>f</sup>	44.0% <sup>c</sup>	49.3%	46.5% <sup>g</sup>	47.3% <sup>e</sup>	46.5% <sup>g</sup>	47.3% <sup>e</sup>	29.6% <sup>d,f,g</sup>	
Thesis or Capstone	100.0%	72.6%	75.4% <sup>f</sup>	78.0%	73.0%	75.7% <sup>g</sup>	75.6% <sup>e</sup>	75.7% <sup>g</sup>	75.6% <sup>e</sup>	34.3% <sup>e,f,g</sup>	
Service Requirement	25.0%	48.4%	45.7%	33.8%	42.0%	37.6%	39.1%	37.6%	39.1%	40.8%	
Service Learning Courses	50.0%	58.1% <sup>c</sup>	57.1% <sup>d</sup>	40.8%	44.2% <sup>c</sup>	42.4% <sup>d,g</sup>	45.2%	42.4% <sup>d,g</sup>	45.2%	53.5% <sup>g</sup>	
Study Abroad Courses	50.0%	66.7% <sup>c</sup>	64.7% <sup>d,f</sup>	39.6% <sup>b</sup>	50.0% <sup>b,c</sup>	44.4% <sup>d,g</sup>	48.2% <sup>e</sup>	44.4% <sup>d,g</sup>	48.2% <sup>e</sup>	21.1% <sup>e,f,g</sup>	
Experiential Ed. Courses	37.5%	52.5% <sup>c</sup>	50.7% <sup>d</sup>	38.0%	39.7% <sup>c</sup>	38.8% <sup>d</sup>	41.0%	38.8% <sup>d</sup>	41.0%	40.0%	
Research-intensive Courses	87.5%	80.6%	81.4% <sup>d</sup>	70.9%	71.5%	71.2% <sup>d</sup>	73.2%	71.2% <sup>d</sup>	73.2%	68.6%	
Internships	0.0% <sup>b</sup>	50.0% <sup>b,c</sup>	44.3% <sup>d,f</sup>	18.4% <sup>b</sup>	26.8% <sup>b,c</sup>	22.3% <sup>d</sup>	26.5% <sup>e</sup>	22.3% <sup>d</sup>	26.5% <sup>e</sup>	15.5% <sup>e,f</sup>	
n	8	62	70	160	138	298	368	298	368	71	
Percent of Total Sample	1.8%	14.1%	15.9%	36.4%	31.4%	67.9%	83.8%	67.9%	83.8%	16.2%	

Source: NCHC 2012 Membership Survey (n = 439).

Note: Significance was tested at the  $p \leq .10$  level, but most of the differences reported are significant at  $p \leq .05$ .

<sup>a</sup>All of the two-year degree institutions are public, and all but three are classified as honors programs.

<sup>b</sup>Significant difference between private and public institutions within honors organization type.

<sup>c</sup>Significant difference between colleges and programs within institutional control grouping.

<sup>d</sup>Significant difference between colleges and programs.

<sup>e</sup>Significant difference between two-year degree institutions and four-year institutions.

<sup>f</sup>Significant difference between two-year degree institutions and four-year honors colleges.

<sup>g</sup>Significant difference between two-year degree institutions and four-year honors programs.

## Thesis Requirement

A significant and sizeable difference exists between two- and four-year institutions whereby four-year institutions are much more likely to have a thesis requirement (57.9% vs. 11.4%). Some greater likelihood of a thesis requirement may occur at honors programs versus honors colleges at smaller institutions (not shown), but the difference is only marginally significant ( $p \leq .10$ ). Essentially, little variation exists among four-year institutions around the overall average of 57.9% with a thesis requirement.

## Capstone Course

A significant and sizeable difference exists between two- and four-year institutions whereby four-year institutions are more likely to have a capstone course (47.3% vs. 29.6%). Honors colleges at private institutions are significantly ( $p = .052$ ) more likely to have a capstone course than those at public institutions (85.7% vs. 46.8%) or than honors programs at private institutions (85.7% vs. 44.0%;  $p \leq .05$ ). With the exception of private honors colleges, which we have already noted is a rare institutional form with a small sub-sample of  $n = 7$  (while there are eight private honors colleges in the sample, one has missing data on capstone courses), there is little variation among four-year institutions around the overall average of 47.3% with a capstone course.

## Thesis or Capstone

When looking at a newly computed variable measuring the presence of either a thesis requirement or a capstone course at member institutions, few will be surprised to see a significant and sizeable difference between two- and four-year institutions whereby four-year institutions are more likely to have either a thesis requirement or a capstone course ( $p \leq .001$ ); three-fourths of four-year institutions have at least one of these curricular components whereas only one-third of two-year institutions do, and most of the latter have capstone courses, given the findings for the previous two measures. Among small four-year institutions, private schools do appear to be more likely than public ones to have either a thesis requirement or capstone course (not shown;  $p \leq .05$ ). Other than that possible exception, four-year institutions display little variation around the 75.6% that have either a thesis requirement or a capstone course.

## Service Requirement

For both two- and four-year institutions, not much variation occurs around the overall average of 39.3% with a service requirement (not shown, though one can readily see in Table 3 that the percentages for two- and four-year institutions both hover right around 40%). However, one possible size effect for this curricular element is that larger four-year private institutions appear to be a possible deviation from the overall pattern, with only 18.2%, whether programs or colleges, having a service requirement. A significant difference exists between larger four-year public ( $n = 161$ ) and private institutions ( $n = 21$ ) in the likelihood of having a service requirement (not shown;  $p \leq .05$ ) whereby large private institutions are less likely to have a service requirement than large public institutions (18.2% vs. 44.7%, not shown).

## Service Learning Courses

Significant differences exist in the provision of service learning courses between four-year institutions' honors programs and both four-year honors colleges and two-year institutions' honors programs, particularly true, perhaps, at institutions of larger size (not shown;  $p \leq .05$ ). Four-year honors colleges and two-year programs are about 30% more likely to have service learning courses than four-year honors programs: only about 42.4% of four-year honors programs have service learning courses whereas about 57.1% of four-year honors colleges and 53.5% of community college honors programs have such service courses (weighted average of  $55.3 / 42.4 = 1.30$ , or 30% more likely).

## Study Abroad Courses

A significant and sizeable difference exists between two- and four-year institutions whereby four-year institutions are much more likely to have study abroad courses (48.2% vs. 21.1%;  $p \leq .01$ ); this is especially true for honors colleges (64.7%;  $p \leq .01$ ), and among four-year institutions honors colleges are 46% more likely ( $64.7 / 44.4 = 1.46$ ) than honors programs to have study abroad courses ( $p \leq .01$ ). Among four-year institutions, public institutions seem on the face to be more likely than private institutions to have study abroad courses, but this difference is only marginally significant ( $p \leq .10$ ). The presence of study abroad courses was the curricular element for which we noticed the most compelling size effects: large four-year institutions are 50% more likely to have honors-specific study abroad courses (58.0% vs. 38.6%,

not shown;  $p \leq .01$ ), though this size effect seems to be most pronounced among honors programs, and large two-year institutions are seven times more likely than small ones to have study abroad courses (38.2% vs. 5.4%, not shown;  $p \leq .01$ ).

### **Experiential Education Courses**

As with most of the other measures that do not involve a senior-level experience, there is no statistically detectable difference between two-year and four-year institutions in the provision of experiential education courses. Thus, little variation appears among honors programs (at either two-year or four-year institutions) around the overall 39.0% (142 of 364 reporting) that have an experiential education course. There may be some greater likelihood of experiential education courses at honors colleges (50.7%) versus honors programs (38.8%), but the difference is only marginally significant ( $p \leq .10$ ), and any such difference seems to apply only among larger public four-year institutions (not shown). Unlike most of the measures of honors curricular characteristics, a significant difference exists between larger and smaller four-year institutions (not shown) whereby larger institutions are about 30% more likely (46.9% vs. 35.3%) to offer experiential education courses ( $p \leq .05$ ).

### **Research-Intensive Courses**

For both two-year and four-year institutions, not much variation occurs around the overall rate of 72.6% with research-intensive courses; the difference between the 73.2% and 68.6% for four-year and two-year institutions is not significant, and the weighted average of the two is 72.6%. Honors colleges may be slightly more likely than honors programs to have research-intensive courses (81.4% vs. 71.2%), but this difference is only marginally significant ( $p \leq .10$ ). The high numbers across all levels of institutional character—e.g., two/four-year, honors program/college, and public/private control—indicate high levels of consensus about the importance of providing research-intensive courses for honors students.

### **Internships**

Among four-year institutions, honors colleges are twice as likely as honors programs to have internships (44.3% vs. 22.3%;  $p \leq .01$ ), and honors colleges at four-year institutions are almost three times more likely to have internships than honors at two-year institutions (44.3% vs. 15.5%;  $p \leq .01$ ). Large four-



year institutions are 71% more likely ( $33.5 / 19.6 = 1.71$ ) to have internships than smaller four-year institutions, regardless of institutional control or honors structure; this contrast can be seen in the “Total Four-Year” column of Table 2 ( $p \leq .01$ ). Also, among four-year schools, public institutions, regardless of honors organization as college or program, are significantly more likely than private ones to have an internship in honors by a factor of almost two (34.0% vs. 17.5%, not shown in tables;  $p \leq .01$ ).

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

One general finding that we have not highlighted above is worth emphasizing: despite the common belief that honors is widely variable, we witnessed few statistically significant differences between private and public institutions in these data. We noted only a few exceptions to this general conclusion. First, service requirements are slightly more common among public (44.0%) than private (33.3%) institutions (not shown), though probably only among larger schools. Second, internships also are more common among public (34.0%) than private (17.5%) institutions. The relative likelihood regarding provision of internships can be seen in the main results presented in Table 3 by comparing private and public columns for colleges and programs.

We also found few statistically distinguishable, meaningful differences across size of institution, again with some exceptions to this generalization: specific incarnations of honors courses—including service, study abroad, experiential, and research courses—are more likely at honors colleges than honors programs at four-year schools, presumably because of their greater resources, greater control over resources and curriculum, and/or economies of scale that come with larger honors student populations. Otherwise, the variability that we witness across size of institution tends to exist within fairly narrow parameters.

The consistency in offerings is clearest when examining undergraduate research opportunities in honors. One of the features that distinguishes honors education is the opportunity for undergraduate students to take on greater independence in pursuing their own research and intellectual projects. As Schuman argues in his *Beginning in Honors: A Handbook*, “A final project or thesis is probably the most pervasive characteristics of honors curricula” (34); the results from this survey bear this out. Three-fourths (75.6%) of four-year member institutions have either a thesis requirement or a capstone course as a prominent part of their honors curriculum. While not as common, a significant minority (34.3%) of two-year member institutions also have at least one

of these options (usually a capstone course) requiring increasing intellectual independence as students approach completion of their program and degree requirements. In particular, honors colleges at private institutions seem universally to have established this experience for honors students (though the small sample size of  $n = 8$  limits our ability to generalize). The numbers for a thesis requirement are somewhat less for colleges than the 94.3% with a thesis/creative project reported by Sederberg (131) from the 2004 NCHC survey of honors colleges, but Sederberg's number was based on a question that asked whether the thesis was available as an opportunity rather than a program requirement. Despite the apparent consensus favoring a thesis or capstone experience, still about 25% of four-year honors units did not have a senior-level thesis or capstone experience by 2012.

Honors units also appear to be making significant efforts to prepare their students for increasing intellectual independence in their upper-class courses. Even more than the opportunity to prepare a thesis or capstone project, the opportunity to take research-intensive courses is a pervasive characteristic of U.S. honors curricula. Research-intensive courses are common at two-year institutions, where approximately 70% of honors programs have research-intensive courses, and at four-year honors colleges the percentage is only about 10 percentage points higher than that (81.4%).

Service is one of the hallmarks of liberal education, and the larger category of service and experiential learning is one of the primary emphases of honors as articulated in the NCHC "Basic Characteristics" documents and the more recent "Definition of Honors Education." The findings presented here indicate a fair degree of consistency across institutions of varying character in providing service and experiential education courses as well as in requiring some service as part of the honors program, but these opportunities are far less common than are undergraduate research training and guided research opportunities. Roughly 40–60% of honors units have these curricular options, depending on the specific institutional location, and large privates, especially, are even less likely than larger publics (by a factor of more than two) to have a service requirement in honors. Given the wording of the question, it is possible that students at the 40–60% of institutions that do not have these curricular elements specifically in honors do nonetheless have them available as part of their larger collegiate experience, but these numbers would seem to leave considerable room for growth and improvement across honors in the United States.

As a specific incarnation of experiential education, honors internships are the rarest of the curricular elements we examined, with only about 25.3% of honors units providing internships specifically in honors, and internships are an even greater rarity at two-year institutions although, understandably, not quite as rare as thesis requirements. Similar to experiential, service, and research-intensive honors courses, honors colleges are much more likely than honors programs to have honors internships, by a factor of almost two, and public institutions are more likely to have them than private ones. As with service and experiential learning options, students are likely to have internships available to them as part of the general collegiate experience when they are not available specifically in honors. However, as the NCHC community continues to reflect on the ways in which honors distinguishes itself—particularly in an era when higher education is increasingly called to account for how it prepares students for the world of work they will face after graduation—we should be considering whether honors has a unique contribution to make in the area of internships or whether we should leave such experiences to be defined in the general curricula for all students in an era of massification (Altbach 1998, 2013; Slaughter 2001; Wilkins and Burke 2015; Clark 1996).

All our findings point to two central conclusions. First, honors units at member institutions seem to value undergraduate research and senior-level experiences involving increased intellectual independence, as reflected in the widespread presence of thesis requirements, capstone courses, and research-intensive courses. Second, the service and experiential learning components (including honors internships and study abroad courses) that are highlighted in NCHC best practices documents have much less consensus and implementation across U.S. honors. Only about two-fifths of member institutions have experiential and service learning courses and service requirements, and even fewer offer honors internships. Considering the prominence that experiential education enjoys in the NCHC best practices documents, these numbers seem low, and they take on even greater weight given the moral significance of service. In a time and place when much of the culture encourages individual success, values accumulation of personal wealth and prestige, and surrounds us with the technological means to satisfy our own particular whims and fancies on demand, we would argue for the increasing importance of encouraging students to think about service to something greater than themselves. Moreover, we would argue for building these opportunities and requirements into the context of honors curricula in which honors educators have more

control and can actively encourage students to reflect more deliberately not only on the rights, privileges, and prestige of honors but also on its duties and responsibilities.

## END NOTES

1. One could also look at honors program size as an indicator of institutional size. Either makes sense. While we did not formally explore the degree to which conclusions would vary using program size as a measure, we find it unlikely. The correlation between institution size and honors program size is fairly strong ( $r = .66$ ), and the eight correlations between the measure of honors program size and each of the binary measures of curriculum were in the same order of magnitude as those observed using overall institution size.
2. Correlations between undergraduate FTE and each of the curricular measures are: (1) thesis,  $r = .01$ ; (2) service requirement,  $r = -.06$ ; (3) capstone,  $r = .05$ ; (4) service learning courses,  $r = .15$ ; (5) study abroad courses,  $r = .24$ ; (6) experiential education courses,  $r = .14$ ; (7) research-intensive courses,  $r = .10$ ; and (8) internships,  $r = .14$ .

## REFERENCES

- Altbach, Philip. 1998. *Comparative Higher Education: Knowledge, the University, and Development*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing.
- Altbach, Philip G. 2013. *The International Imperative in Higher Education*. Rotterdam, the Netherlands: SensePublishers.
- Anderson, Mark, Karen Lyons, and Norman Weiner. 2014. *The Honors Thesis: A Handbook for Honors Directors, Deans, and Faculty Advisors*. Lincoln, NE: National Collegiate Honors Council. NCHC Monograph Series.
- Braid, Bernice. 2008. "Engagement in Learning, Liberal Education, and Honors." Pp. 31–36 in *Inspiring Exemplary Teaching and Learning: Perspective on Teaching Academically Talented College Students*, edited by L. Clark and J. Zubizarreta. Birmingham, AL: National Collegiate Honors Council.
- Clark, Burton R. 1996. "Substantive Growth and Innovative Organization: New Categories for Higher Education Research." *Higher Education* 32(4):417–30.

- National Collegiate Honors Council. [2005] 2014. "Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors College." Retrieved February 29, 2016 <<http://nchchonors.org/faculty-directors/basic-characteristics-of-a-fully-developed-honors-college>>
- . [1994] 2014. "Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors Program." Retrieved February 29, 2016 <<http://nchchonors.org/faculty-directors/basic-characteristics-of-a-fully-developed-honors-program>>
- . 2013. "Definition of Honors Education." Retrieved February 29, 2016 <<http://nchchonors.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/Definition-of-Honors-Education.pdf>>
- Schuman, Samuel. 2006. *Beginning in Honors: A Handbook*. 4th ed. Lincoln, NE: National Collegiate Honors Council. NCHC Monograph Series.
- Scott, Rick. 2013. "President's Column." Retrieved February 29, 2016 <<http://nchchonors.org/newsletters/nhc-newsletter-special-edition>>
- Sederberg, Peter C. 2005. "Characteristics of the Contemporary Honors College: A Descriptive Analysis of a Survey of NCHC Member Colleges." *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council* 6(2):121–36.
- Slaughter, Sheila. 2001. "Problems in Comparative Higher Education: Political Economy, Political Sociology, and Postmodernism." *Higher Education* 41:389–412.
- Taylor, Bob Pepperman. 2008. "How to Create an Honors College." Pp. 97–110 in *The Honors College Phenomenon*, edited by P. Sederberg. Lincoln, NE: National Collegiate Honors Council. NCHC Monograph Series.
- Wilkins, Andrew, and Penny Jane Burke. 2015. "Widening Participation in Higher Education: The Role of Professional and Social Class Identities and Commitments." *British Journal of Sociology* 36(3):434–52.

---

The authors may be contacted at  
[ajcognardblack@smcm.edu](mailto:ajcognardblack@smcm.edu).